

An encounter like no other!

By Fr. Steven Kostoff

Among the Myrrhbearing Women, it is clear that Mary Magdalene is something of a “first among equals.” In the Synoptic Gospels she is always listed first among the other women whose names are recorded by the Evangelists [Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:1; Luke 24:10]. In the Gospel According to Saint John, she is the only one of these remarkable women actually named by the Evangelist. That saint John also knew the tradition of multiple women visiting the tomb of Christ “on the first day of the week” [John 20:1] is indicated by Mary Magdalene using “we” when returning from the tomb and excitedly telling the disciples what she/they discovered there, mistaken though she was as to the reason: “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know here they have laid him” [John 20:2]. And it is Saint Mark and Saint John who record the fact that she is the first of the women to actually see the Risen Lord [Mark 16:9; John 20:14]. In addition, it is the Evangelist Mark who informs us that Jesus had “cast out seven demons” from Mary Magdalene [verse 9]. Saint Mary Magdalene thus stands out among these outstanding, though self-effacing women, who are now known throughout the world wherever the Gospel is proclaimed. The Myrrhbearing Women were privileged to be the first human beings to discover the empty tomb, and the first as a body to behold the Risen Christ [Matthew 28:9].

This past Sunday, we heard the account in Saint Mark’s Gospel about the role of the Myrrhbearing Women in the discovery of the empty tomb [Mark 15:43-16:8]. This is the only Sunday during the Paschal season that we hear from a Gospel other than Saint John’s. However, I would like to return to Saint John’s Gospel for the purpose of this meditation and to share a few words about the extraordinary encounter between the Risen Lord and Mary Magdalene recorded there [20:11-18]. This is an encounter like no other. I recall the renowned British biblical scholar C. H. Dodd writing that this account in Saint John’s Gospel has no remote counterpart in all of the ancient literature of the Graeco-Roman world. It is absolutely unique.

At first, as recorded above, Mary Magdalene believed that the tomb was empty because “they have taken the Lord out of the tomb” [John 20:2]. This was her “natural” reaction to the fact of the empty tomb. She then temporarily disappears from the narrative as we hear of Saints Peter and John discovering the empty tomb, prompted by Mary’s troubling words. But after this discovery “the disciples went back to their home” [verse 17]. Then, Mary appears again “weeping outside the tomb” [verse 11]. When she stoops to look into the tomb she is surprised by the presence of two angels, who pointedly ask her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She again repeats her despairing belief that “they have taken

away my Lord” [verse 13]. At this point “she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus” [verse 14].

And then that remarkable dialogue and encounter occurs. At first Jesus will repeat the words of the angels: “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?” [verse 15]. Still fixated on the mistaken belief that someone had removed the body of Jesus, Mary, for the third time, repeats that assertion to “the gardener,” hoping that he will cooperate in disclosing the whereabouts of the body of Jesus. And then all is transformed “in the twinkling of an eye” when the Risen Jesus pronounces her name: “Mary” [verse 16]. That is all that was necessary, and Christ prepared us for that immediate recognition upon hearing one’s name pronounced, “I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father... My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand” [John 10:14, 27-28].

When the Risen Good Shepherd speaks her name she immediately recognizes His voice as foretold in the words above and she responds with the endearing title “Rab-bo’ni!” (The evangelist parenthetically informs us that this means Teacher). This encounter like no other is actually consummated through the seemingly simple pronouncement of a name and a title exchanged with both love and devotion between Christ and His disciple Mary Magdalene. I believe that this moment of recognition would be impossible to express in words. We can only bow our heads in silence and awe. Or, perhaps like the other Myrrhbearing Women, “trembling and astonishment” [Mark 16:8] will come upon us if we allow the full power of this encounter to enter our minds and hearts. Mary’s bewilderment, despair and confusion gave way to joy and regeneration. That the setting was a “garden” is no accident. Now, upon returning to the other disciples for a second time, a new message is delivered to them, for Saint John tells us that “Mary Magdalene went and said to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’” [verse 18].

At one point on this incredibly momentous morning, Mary Magdalene told the angels that “they have taken away *my* Lord.” Saint Thomas said, when also coming to recognition of the Risen Lord, “*My* Lord and *my* God!” In these words, both of these saints made it very *personal*. The encounter with Christ, regardless of the circumstances, is always something deeply personal. Each unique human being has a unique relationship with Christ. We say that He is *our* Lord, but we equally say that He is *my* Lord. **Con’t Page 8**

Fr. Steven Con't

Therefore, I would like to quote again the deeply encouraging words of Father Alexander Men who, when commenting on the events of John 20, wrote: "Therefore today, on this Paschal day, let each of you, returning home, carry in his heart this joy and the thought that the Lord has appeared to me, too. He is risen for me, and speaks for me, and remains with me, and will forever be as my Lord, as my Savior, as my God. May the Lord protect you!"

A pious tradition has Saint Mary Magdalene greeting the Roman emperor Tiberius with the words "Christ is Risen!" These words reverberate to this day with the glorious "good news" of life out of death.

Sunday of the Samaritan Woman

Commemorated on [May 14](#)

The Holy Martyr Photina (Svetlana) the Samaritan Woman, her sons Victor (named Photinus) and Joses; and her sisters Anatola, Phota, Photis, Paraskeva, Kyriake; Nero's daughter Domnina; and the Martyr Sebastian: The holy Martyr Photina was the Samaritan Woman, with whom the Savior conversed at Jacob's Well (John. 4:5-42).

During the time of the emperor Nero (54-68), who displayed excessive cruelty against Christians, Saint Photina lived in Carthage with her younger son Joses and fearlessly preached the Gospel there. Her eldest son Victor fought bravely in the Roman army against barbarians, and was appointed military commander in the city of Attalia (Asia Minor). Later, Nero called him to Italy to arrest and punish Christians.

Sebastian, an official in Italy, said to Saint Victor, "I know that you, your mother and your brother, are followers of Christ. As a friend I advise you to submit to the will of the emperor. If you inform on any Christians, you will receive their wealth. I shall write to your mother and brother, asking them not to preach Christ in public. Let them practice their faith in secret."

Saint Victor replied, "I want to be a preacher of Christianity like my mother and brother." Sebastian said, "O Victor, we all know what woes await you, your mother and brother." Then Sebastian suddenly felt a sharp pain in his eyes. He was dumbfounded, and his face was somber.

For three days he lay there blind, without uttering a word. On the fourth day he declared, "The God of the Christians is the only true God." Saint Victor asked why Sebastian had suddenly changed his mind. Sebastian replied, "Because Christ is calling me." Soon he was baptized, and immediately regained his sight. Saint Sebastian's servants, after witnessing the miracle, were also baptized.

Reports of this reached Nero, and he commanded that the Christians be brought to him at Rome. Then the Lord Himself appeared to the confessors and said, "Fear not, for I am with you. Nero, and all who serve him, will be vanquished." The Lord said to Saint Victor, "From this day forward, your name will be Photinus, because through you, many will be enlightened and will believe in Me." The Lord then told the Christians to strengthen and encourage Saint Sebastian to persevere until the end.

All these things, and even future events, were revealed to Saint Photina. She left Carthage in the company of several Christians and joined the confessors in Rome.

At Rome the emperor ordered the saints to be brought before him and he asked them whether they truly believed in Christ. All the confessors refused to renounce the Savior. Then the emperor gave orders to smash the martyrs' finger joints. During the torments, the confessors felt no pain, and their hands remained unharmed.

Nero ordered that Saints Sebastian, Photinus and Joses be blinded and locked up in prison, and Saint Photina and her five sisters Anatola, Phota, Photis, Paraskeva and Kyriake were sent to the imperial court under the supervision of Nero's daughter Domnina. Saint Photina converted both Domnina and all her servants to Christ. She also converted a sorcerer, who had brought her poisoned food to kill her.

Three years passed, and Nero sent to the prison for one of his servants, who had been locked up. The messengers reported to him that Saints Sebastian, Photinus and Joses, who had been blinded, had completely recovered, and that people were visiting them to hear their preaching, and indeed the whole prison had been transformed into a bright and fragrant place where God was glorified.

Nero then gave orders to crucify the saints, and to beat their naked bodies with straps. On the fourth day the emperor sent servants to see whether the martyrs were still alive. But, approaching the place of the tortures, the servants fell blind. An angel of the Lord freed the martyrs from their crosses and healed them. The saints took pity on the blinded servants, and restored their sight by their prayers to the Lord. Those who were healed came to believe in Christ and were soon baptized.

In an impotent rage Nero gave orders to flay the skin from Saint Photina and to throw the martyr down a well. Sebastian, Photinus and Joses had their legs cut off, and they were thrown to dogs, and then had their skin flayed off. The sisters of Saint Photina also suffered terrible torments. Nero gave orders to cut off their breasts and then to flay their skin. **Con't Page 9**

Two new books “fill a gap” for Orthodox tweens

Two recently published books, *Queen Abigail the Wise* and *Vanessa the Wonder-Worker*, are helping to fill a gap in Orthodox Christian fiction for “tween” readers between the ages of 9 and 12. Bookended by heavily illustrated readers for toddlers and serious tomes about dating for teens, the world of Orthodox Christian fiction hasn’t had much to offer tweens. But the new series of chapter books from author/illustrator Grace Brooks, a parishioner at Saint Paul Church, Las Vegas, NV, promises to change That, engaging tween readers at an age when crucial long-term ties to the faith are formed.

The intersection between Church life and “real life” is fertile ground for adventure to the books’ tween characters who encounter each other at church once a week. They start as acquaintances, become friends and find themselves learning about their faith and themselves in ways that are engaging, thought-provoking and easy for young readers to relate to.

In *Queen Abigail the Wise*, 10-year-old Abigail is having trouble paying attention in church, prompting her priest makes a deal with her. At stake is an icon she knows will help her focus, but to get it, she’ll need help from four other friends. She starts the “Every Tuesday Club” so they can go to work on this and other problems. Over the weeks of Lent leading up to Pascha, her adventure ends up bringing them closer to their faith, their family and each other. In the sequel, *Vanessa the Wonder-Worker*, 12-year-old Vanessa turns to the Club when her older brother is going through a crisis of faith. Vanessa must learn how to express matters of faith in ways that a skeptic can understand, and she gets help from a pious stranger who seems to just know things. If Vanessa wants to find the miracle she’s looking for, she will have to learn more and confront her own desires to be successful in the world.

Both books have enjoyed strong reviews in the Orthodox community, and Grace is planning least two more volumes in the series.

“*Queen Abigail the Wise* is a delightful read for kids and a wonderful resource for parents looking for engaging Orthodox literature to include in their family’s home library,” said Molly Sabourin, author of *Close to Home: One Orthodox Mother’s Quest for Patience, Peace and Perseverance*. “This book is a treasure!”

Elissa D. Bjeletic, host of the “Raising Saints” Orthodox podcast and author of *Blueprints for the Little Church*, had similar praise for *Vanessa*: “My ten-year old absolutely loved this book! She could not stop talking about how great it was. I recommend this whole-heartedly!”

Archpriest John Dresko, Rector of Saint Paul Church, Grace’s Pastor, and proofreader of both books, said that “Grace has captured the essence of a pre- and young-teen’s struggles, which mirror in a small way the struggles of all of us. Her writing is vibrant and captivating. I have the highest recommendation to pastors and parish bookstore managers — your parish young people will love these books.”

Both volumes are available on Amazon, as indicated below. Wholesale pricing is available directly from the author for orders of three or more copies.

Order at the links below or by calling the author directly at 816-985-0305.

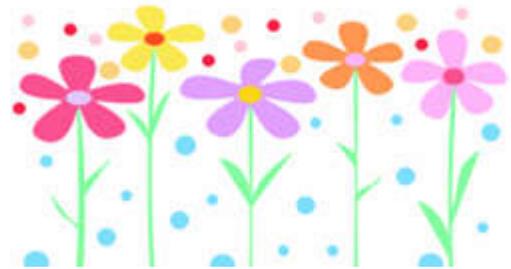
Queen Abigail the Wise

[On Amazon](#)

270, illustrated

Amazon price: \$14.99

Bulk price (3 or more) from the author: \$10 plus shipping.



Samaritan Woman con’t

An expert in cruelty, the emperor readied the fiercest execution for Saint Photis: they tied her by the feet to the tops of two bent-over trees. When the ropes were cut the trees sprang upright and tore the martyr apart. The emperor ordered the others beheaded. Saint Photina was removed from the well and locked up in prison for twenty days.

After this Nero had her brought to him and asked if she would now relent and offer sacrifice to the idols. Saint Photina spit in the face of the emperor, and laughing at him, said, “O most impious of the blind, you profligate and stupid man! Do you think me so deluded that I would consent to renounce my Lord Christ and instead offer sacrifice to idols as blind as you?”

Hearing such words, Nero gave orders to again throw the martyr down the well, where she surrendered her soul to God (ca. 66).

On the Greek Calendar, Saint Photina is commemorated on February 26.

Acts 11:19-26, 29-30 (Epistle)

Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only. But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord. Then news of these things came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch. When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord. For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord.

Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul. And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch. Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea. This they also did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.

John 4:5-42 (Gospel)

So He came to a city of Samaria which is called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Now Jacob's well was there. Jesus therefore, being wearied from His journey, sat thus by the well. It was about the sixth hour. A woman of Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give Me a drink." For His disciples had gone away into the city to buy food. Then the woman of Samaria said to Him, "How is it that You, being a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. Jesus answered and said to her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water." The woman said to Him, "Sir, You have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep. Where then do You get that living water? Are You greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank from it himself, as well as his sons and his livestock?"

Jesus answered and said to her, "Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life." The woman said to Him, "Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw." Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here."

The woman answered and said, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You have well said, 'I have no husband,' for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; in that you spoke truly." The woman said to Him, "Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to Him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When He comes, He will tell us all things." Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am He."

And at this point His disciples came, and they marveled that He talked with a woman; yet no one said, "What do You seek?" or, "Why are You talking with her?" The woman then left her waterpot, went her way into the city, and said to the men, "Come, see a Man who told me all things that I ever did. Could this be the Christ? Then they went out of the city and came to Him. In the meantime His disciples urged Him, saying, "Rabbi, eat." But He said to them, "I have food to eat of which you do not know." Therefore the disciples said to one another, "Has anyone brought Him anything to eat?" Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work. Do you not say, 'There are still four months and then comes the harvest'? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest! And he who reaps receives wages, and gathers fruit for eternal life, that both he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together. For in this the saying is true: 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you have not labored; others have labored, and you have entered into their labors." And many of the Samaritans of that city believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified, "He told me all that I ever did." So when the Samaritans had come to Him, they urged Him to stay with them; and He stayed there two days. And many more believed because of His own word. Then they said to the woman, "Now we believe, not because of what you said, for we ourselves have heard Him and we know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world."